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ABSTRACT

Speech communication in general and rhetoric in particular address suggestions for protecting the "space" in which public conversation occurs in a democracy. Although the framers of the Constitution clearly envisioned significant citizen involvement in policy making, citizen access to the process has greatly declined, especially at the national level. Educators in general and speech communication educators in particular have historically encouraged greater citizen awareness as part of their instructional mission at the college level. The primary focus of a variation of a 16-week "basic" speech communication course is the study of public communication as crucial to providing an informed electorate in a democracy and as a necessary skill for empowering students to become citizens in a 21st century democracy. The course has three objectives: (1) to enable students to comprehend the role of public communication in democratic societies; (2) to enable students to critically evaluate human communication; and (3) to instill an appreciation of the importance of freedom of speech in American society. Such a class becomes a forum where traditional concepts of liberty, equality and justice link with contemporary American citizenship by way of the classic rhetorical premise that a good citizen is a good person who speaks well. (Nineteen references are attached.) (RS)

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TAKING IT TO THE CLASSROOM: STRATEGIES FOR RE-CLAIMING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH COMMUNICATION EDUCATION

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One way of understanding how communication functions in society is to conceive of it as choices made by persons, fields, and societies in constructing relationships (Goodnight, 1982). These choices appear as patterns of varied activity or spheres in which some communication practices are emphasized and others are not. There are three spheres: the personal, within which conversation ordinarily takes place; the technical, in which experts discuss field-grounded "state of the art" issues and the public, in which common collective issues engage in controversy and struggle for power (Goodnight, 1987, pp. 428-29).

Within the public sphere, people voice their concerns, find common interests and emerge as a collective (Hauser, p. 438). Here citizens provide opinions requisite to group action for participation in democratic decision making. A public sphere orientation, with its atmosphere of free and open deliberation, facilitates discovery of truth, better decisions about public matters, a political system responsive to the people, propaganda resistance and general American public interest (Cooper, p. 174).

Decline in Citizen Participation

Although the framers of the Constitution clearly envisioned significant citizen involvement in policy making, citizen access to the process has greatly declined, especially at the national level. Instead, average citizens' link to government behavior is usually that of judge or audience rather than participant. Hahn believes that at some point any deliberative role for American citizens ended. Whether that point was when congressional government was replaced by presidential government or when media presentation replaced "face-to-face" public address is unclear. However, as citizen involvement and public interest diminished, as elections and governance became ritual, "'the public' and 'the citizens' became transmogrified into 'the audience'" (Hahn, p. 2). Citizens watch rather than participate. As a result, the term "public" no longer fits American people, because the character of contemporary communication inhibits citizen involvement, input in decision-making and, above all, judgment.

Cooper believes democratic government officials have long been occupied with citizen

concerns, particularly as expressed in public opinion. Traditional wisdom has been that such officials must conform to public whims, stay within the bounds of public opinion or lose their offices. However, these same elected officials also worry about the wisdom of public opinion and question whether or not the public is wise enough to decide how to deal with public issues.

Stearney ("A Habermasian...") argues that "by almost all available evidence" there is a widespread turning away from public life into what is variously referred to a "privatism, individualism and emotivism" (p. 1) and expresses concern about the deterioration of the public sphere ("Reclaiming Citizenship...").

A 1990 study which examined the role of citizens, candidates and the news media during the 1988 presidential election reports that in contrast to much of the world "a dangerous disconnection is widening between the American electorate and its own political process." It concludes that "after more than 200 years of the fight for the right to vote" that half of the American public does not do it (Schwartz).

Most of the more than one thousand young people aged 15-to-24 surveyed by People For the American Way in November 1989 were less interested in public life than previous generations were (Fowler, p. 10; Clark p. 207). Asked to rate a series of seven possible goals, study respondents ranked "being involved in helping your community be a better place" dead last--well behind career and financial success, a happy family life, and "enjoying yourself and having a good time" (Fowler, p. 11).

In the past twenty years since the voting age was lowered to 18, there has been a steady decline in young voters' interest and participation in the political process; in 1990, just one in five voted in congressional elections (Morin and Balz).

A second study released in June of 1990 by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press reveals that while Americans of all ages are "ignorant [of] and indifferent" toward public affairs, 18-to-34-year-olds inhabit an unprecedented age of ignorance and indifference toward social, economic and political issues. This generation (which has more formal education than any other in American history--slightly less than half of all 18-to-29-year-olds have attended college), has "less knowledge and less

political commitments" than any before it. As a result, it is an easy and sometimes willing target for those seeking to manipulate public opinion. "Their [18-to-34-year-olds] limited appetites and attitudes are shaping the practice of politics and the nature of our democracy" (Morin).

Morin and Balz argue that the social upheaval of the last two decades, combined with the growing anti-government attitudes of their parents and older adults, directed many "twenty-somethings" inward, away from politics and in a sense, away from each other. Fowler contends that the impoverished idea of citizenship held by most young Americans is one source of their disconnection from public life. Their notions of good citizen rarely has a political dimension and many show little grasp of the responsibilities that accompany the freedoms of citizenship (p. 11).

Methods to Protect Public Space

Suggestions for protecting the "space" in which public conversation occurs in a democracy include institutional guarantees for a public sphere; providing equal access and right of participation to all citizens (Hauser, pp. 438-9) and keeping the public well informed through debates and discussions (Cooper, p. 10). The majority of the 15-to-24-year-olds in the 1989 People for the American Way study identified schools and teachers second only to parents and family as the strongest influence on their views of citizenship (Fowler, p. 11; Clark, p. 207). It seems that education may not only protect the public space but may inform the public that such a place exits.

Speech communication in general and rhetoric in particular addresses all of these suggestions. Barber maintains that at the heart of strong democracy is talk, "human interaction that involves language or linguistic symbols":

> Talk appears as a mediator of affection and affiliation as well as of interest and identity, of patriotism as well as of individuality. Political talk is not talk **about** the world; it is talk that makes and remakes the world. Strong democratic talk always involves listening as well as speaking, feeling as well as thinking, and acting as well as reflecting (pp. 177-8).

A Role For Communication

Traditionally, students in American colleges and universities are frequently required to take some variation of a speech communication course as a general requirement. Often these courses target podium-style public speaking. However, educators in general and speech communication educators in particular have also historically encouraged greater citizen awareness as part of their instructional mission at the college level. Newlon believes a primary purpose of popular education to be the development of s social and political intelligence among people to improve the process of democracy (p. 172) and Willing et al argues for teachers embracing a concept of a democratic education which cultivates individuality, self-government, equality, and critical intelligence (p. 150). Weaver addresses the sermonic value-based nature of teaching and practicing rhetorical communication:

> We are all of us preachers in private or public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it our way. We speak as rhetoricians affecting one another for good or ill. That is why I must agree with Quintilian that the true orator is the good man, skilled in speaking--good in formed character and right in his ethical philosophy. Rhetoric must be viewed formally as operating at the point where literature and politics meet. The rhetorician makes use of the moving power of literary presentation to induce in his hearers an attitude or decision which is political in the very broadest sense (p. 317).

An open society calls for free and responsible speech and communication of all kinds from an electorate that is both informed and skilled in disseminating that knowledge. The machinery is in place in American college classrooms to utilize the public sphere. Information is needed on how to get into this "public space" and, more importantly, why occupying it is so important for citizens.

While podium speaking is still a valuable skill, approaching speech in the classroom from the perspective of teaching how and why to participate in an open and free society is instrumental. American students need to realize that "participatory democracy" is not an oxymoron. What follows is a brief discussion of one basic speech communication course that attempts to rhetorically practice and

teach that very idea.

The Class

This course is a variation of a sixteen-week "basic" speech communication class. The primary focus is the study of public communication as crucial to providing an informed electorate in a democracy and as a necessary skill for empowering students to become citizens in a twenty-first century democracy. There are three required texts or sets of readings: Thomas L. Tedford's Public Speaking in a Free Society (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), the Public Agenda Foundation's The Boundaries of Free Speech: How Free is Too Free? (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992) and a set of readings compiled by the instructor. These include political cartoons dealing with the First Amendment and issues such as flag burning, pornography and sex education. Also included in this compilation is Chapter Two of John Stuart Mill's essay On Liberty (accompanied by an outline provided by the instructor) and a "briefing sheet" on an American democratic ethic expressed in the First Amendment ("the most desirable [most ethical] rhetoric and public communication provides the fullest basis for choice"). A copy of the Speech Communication Association's "Credo For Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society" is provided, as are the First and Fourteenth Amendments, various news articles addressing American's willingness to "curtail freedom of speech" and "Censorship News," a newsletter of the National Coalition Against Censorship. The compiled readings end with two articles briefly introducing rhetorical communication and the "nature" of rhetorical criticism.

The course objectives are introduced and discussed in detail during the first class session. There are three objectives in this basic speech communication course. First, students are expected to comprehend the role of public communication in democratic societies. Second, the course is designed to enable students to critically evaluate human communication. Finally, the class is structured to instill an appreciation of the importance of freedom of speech in American society.

The format for this course involves three speeches, two exams and a speech critique. The first speech assignment asks each student to discuss three points including where the student was five years

ago and where s/he expects to be five years from now, what s/he thinks are the most significant issues in the presidential election and why and why her/his university should or should not have speech codes prohibiting certain kinds of offensive speech by students or faculty.

The second speech assignment requires each student to inform the class about a public issue that has been discussed in the media within the past six months. A response of understanding about the issue is sought by each student from the class and so each must provide the class with good reasons for listening (eg ethos, pathos, logos) as well as specific sources and audience-linked statements. The final exercise is an extensive speech motivating the class to take some kind of action regarding an issue of genuine concern to the student. Topics are to have serious regional, national or internal focus. Research and evidence as well as sources are emphasized.

The speeches are spaced through-out the semester so that students have acquired theory which they put into practice for each assignment. For example, a student does not only read about the importance of becoming a skilled communicator in order to contribute to a free society's "marketplace of ideas" but s/he also **contributes** to that marketplace by speaking. Critical listening is taught as the counterpart to effective speaking just as the freedom to listen is presented as important to the workings of a democracy as the freedom to speak. The Critique Assignment enables each student to apply standards of critical evaluation to a rhetorical artifact in order to practice the method of analysis presented in class.

All assignments and class discussions are constantly tied to the day-to-day activities of college sophomores in late twentieth century America. Students are constantly encouraged to speak-up and let their ideas be heard regarding course topics during class discussion. Constructive criticism of ideas is taught and practiced.

The first two weeks of the semester involve understanding what the class is "about" and introduces a brief history of public speaking in democracies from classical Greece to the United States. Basic public speaking theory is presented (eg audience analysis and determining speech goals) and then the class moves into the area of democratic values, free speech and ethical communication. At this

point, the compiled readings are also discussed including John Stuart Mill's perspectives as well as contemporary challenges to what is and is not "acceptable" communication according to the First Amendment.

Students are taught that American society values every individual as a being with dignity and worth, as capable of reasoning and as an equal. They also learn assumptions of democracy which flow from beliefs of individual worth, capacity and equality: preference for persuasion over force, freedom to communicate and to receive information and opinion communicated by others, that citizens of a democratic society are "made wise" by free, vigorous discussion and debate after which a majority rule prevails and that within the context of majority rule, certain fundamental rights are protected for the minority.

Areas of concern for developing a personal communication ethic for speaking in a free society are discussed. These include a responsibility to self to know the subject one speaks about, a responsibility to the audience to consider them as persons of dignity and worth who have the capacity to critically reason and a responsibility to be certain speech content is grounded in sound inferences and evidence. A final ethical consideration, the "cornerstone of our society," is that students have a responsibility to be certain when they speak that through the "clash" of debate, the "best" thoughts emerge and are accepted by a free people:

> You support this system of liberty of expression when you become thoroughly informed about your speech subjects, base your speaking upon reason and evidence, use honest information to establish your credibility, and employ appeals to human emotions, needs, and values responsibly. In addition, you demonstrate a constructive concern for a free society when you encourage others--including those with whom you might disagree--to participate in the marketplace of ideas by presenting their opinions for the consideration by the citizenry (Tedford, p. 49).

Critical listening is then examined with particular emphasis on listener responsibilities that include encouraging debate--a free and open exchange of ideas--and permitting the speaker to be

heard. The next several weeks of the course are devoted to learning the traditional components of public speaking including that it should be audience oriented, research-based and organized.

The rhetorical dimension of public communication takes precedent in the final third of this class, both in terms of production and consumption of rhetorical speech. A unit of speech criticism precedes the unit on persuasive communication. Rhetorical criticism is presented as "informed, fair-minded analysis and evaluation of a speech" (Tedford, p. 336). A rationale for learning criticism is presented including the notion that it helps students "survive" in the day-to-day goings on of their society since so much of what goes on around them is rhetorical behavior. The class learns that evaluation assesses the effectiveness (speaker goal and audience response to it), artistic quality (form, content, language and delivery) and, particularly, social worth of a speech.

This latter element is particularly emphasized. Students are taught that the critic should go beyond effectiveness and artistic quality to assess the ethics and social consequences of discourse. They learn to ask whether or not the speech represents what the speaker believes, demonstrates respect for the audience and presents content that is accurate and rational. Students are also encouraged to ask who benefits most if the proposals of the speech are adopted and to consider whether or not the rhetoric supports principles of a free society. If the rhetoric they are consuming does not fit the social worth criterion, students are taught to "take note" and call attention to such self-serving speech and condemn it. In so doing, the student accomplishes two important things. First s/he prevents themself from "falling victim" to manipulative communication of the moment while simultaneously fulfilling an important civic responsibility. After completing this unit, students have acquired an appreciation for "responsibility of statement" as it applies to both their speaking and listening behaviors.

The final course unit begins with reading The Public Agenda Foundation's <u>The Boundaries of Free Speech: How Free is Too Free?</u>. This text serves as a springboard for students' own perspectives regarding censorship of expression in contemporary society. Three views regarding censorship are initially presented: strict limits, backed up with force of law; sensible limits enforced by private institutions and freedom of expression with only rare abridgments. No view is presented as right or wrong. All are

encouraged to express their opinions and comment on those of other class members regarding the issues of the First Amendment and communication and citizen responsibility in the 1990s and beyond.

Persuasive speeches are presented during the final class periods. These are designed to incorporate essentially all that has been learned about effective speech, freedom of expression and freedom to listen and question in the course. Students are encouraged to be "good" people who "speak well." This final assignment is one during which they are encouraged to speak effectively and listen critically. These skills are important because students' own well-being is directly affected by their performances. However, more significantly from the perspective of living in a democratic society, each act of communication speaking and listening is imperative because the well-being of the public is directly influenced by the student's rhetorical behavior.

Conclusion

Boyte suggests that a dynamic education for democracy and citizenship must take place in many settings in American society, including public forums, civic resource centers, large-scale citizen groups and formal educational institutions (p. 156). It is within that latter that the widespread public debate about the meaning of democracy may be rekindled among young Americans:

> Democracy is part of a pedagogical struggle in which conditions can be created for students and others to invest in the debates over the meaning and nature of democracy as both a discourse and a critical practice (Giroux and McLaren, p. xii).

A university speech communication classroom is one unique pedagogical situation where the discourse and doing of democracy merge. Freedom of expression as a theory becomes freedom of speech as a practice. Such a class becomes a forum where traditional concepts of liberty, equality and justice link with contemporary American citizenship by way of the classic rhetorical premise that a good citizen is a good person who speaks well.

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